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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S VISIT TO PUTUMAYO HIGHLIGHTS USG
ASSISTANCE

Summary

¶1. (SBU) Ambassador Brownfield visited Villa Garzon, Putumayo on February 8, to inaugurate a major road pavement project and survey a water treatment project funded by USAID. Local officials touted the road as an important step to reducing Putumayo's isolation, improving security, and promoting prosperity. The Ambassador also met local police and army commanders. The Colombian National Police (CNP) reported progress in its aerial eradication operations due to improved security, but cited growing coca production in national parks and reserves. Military officials described advances against the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), but noted growing FARC presence in border towns with Ecuador. The Ambassador also met with indigenous and Afro-Colombian leaders who thanked him for USG-supported local-governance projects. End Summary.

The Road to Putumayo's Future

¶2. (U) The Ambassador inaugurated a USG-GOC joint road project in Putumayo -- with USAID and the GOC providing USD 12 million each -- to pave 42 kilometers of road from Puerto Caicedo to Villa Garzon. This is a critical stretch of the Mocoa-San Miguel road makes up Putumayo's most important connection to the rest of Colombia and Ecuador. The road will improve commerce and overall security in this isolated department, which has suffered from FARC activity, illicit coca cultivation, and a lack of economic opportunities.

¶3. (U) Over 400 local residents attended the public groundbreaking ceremony in Villa Garzon's community arena, enthusiastically cheering the start of the road construction project. Local and national government officials linked the road project to a safer, more prosperous community. Luz Dary Garcia, Mayor of Puerto Caicedo, said the road would transition Putumayo to "progress and peace." Accion Social director Luis Alfonso Hoyos and Representative Guillermo Rivera underscored the road's impact in moving Putumayo from illegality and violence to legal commerce and a sustainable economy. Governor Felipe Guzman and Representative Orlando Guerra conveyed similar messages of hope, but also called for more social investment and an end to aerial eradication. Guzman said local farmers were ready to pull coca out of

"their properties and their hearts" if provided alternatives.

¶4. (U) Under a delightfully refreshing steady downpour, the Ambassador also visited a water treatment plant, a joint USAID-U.S. Army Corps of Engineers project completed three years ago. The plant provides clean water to 15,000 local residents. The Ambassador also participated in a signing ceremony between the USG and the departmental government, initiating new support for the design and implementation of departmental and municipal development plans in Putumayo. USAID (USD 140,000) and the departmental and municipal levels of government (USD 180,000) jointly funded the project.

Aerial Eradication Operations as a National Model

¶5. (SBU) At the local CNP airbase, Colonel Gamboa briefed the Ambassador on the success of the GOC's aerial eradication operations. Gamboa said it represents the most Colombian-intensive spray package of the three operating in the country, serving as a "nationalization model." Still, he said NAS equipment and technical funding remains critical to continuing operations. Gamboa noted that Putumayo has a strong FARC presence and remains a primary source of coca production in Colombia. He reported that spray planes took over 300 bullets in Colombia in 2007, which translates into several hits per operating day. Gamboa outlined the GOC's independent environmental auditing policy and compensation program for accidental fumigation of licit crops. He said the GOC faces three challenges in its anti-narcotics efforts in Putumayo -- insufficient air bases, replanting of coca in areas that have been eradicated, and growing coca production

in the department's national parks and indigenous reserves where aerial eradication is prohibited.

Security Better but Border Concerns Remain

¶6. (U) Brigadier General Javier Fernandez, Commander of the 27th Brigade, reported improved security from the Colombian military's offensive in Putumayo, citing zero terrorist attacks in 2007, reduced kidnappings, increased tourism, and safer roads. Military successes against the FARC in 2007 resulted in 299 captured, 44 demobilized, and 103 killed in combat. He said 50 percent of the FARC's members in the region are children, some as young as 12 years old. Many deserter and captured female FARC describe horrific conditions of coerced sex and forced abortions. He added that once military forces secure an area, integrated GOC efforts to provide schools, infrastructure, and economic opportunities follow. Fernandez said the USAID-funded road will allow the region's licit economy to "take off."

¶7. (U) Despite military successes, Fernandez said significant problems remain. The FARC's "political war" generates fabricated allegations of human rights violations. FARC landmines continue to injure and kill civilians and security forces. Fernandez called coca production "ecocide," comparing a 1979 satellite photo of a heavily forested area with today's barren landscape.

¶8. (SBU) Fernandez voiced concern over the porous border with Ecuador. The FARC has infiltrated Ecuadorian border towns - where Colombians now comprise 50 percent of the population - and even started constructing roads for their drug routes. The FARC likely maintains its cocaine production labs are likely located in Ecuador. Fernandez reported progress in relations with his Ecuadorian counterparts, who recently provided useful information on a FARC camp they attacked and destroyed. .

Aiding Indigenous and Afro-Colombian Groups

¶9. (U) Local indigenous leader Luis Lopez said the indigenous -- who make up 19 percent (45,515) of Putumayo's population -- were taking strong steps to improve self-governance and collaboration with local officials. Lopez thanked the Ambassador for the USG's grant of USD 150,000 to OZIP, one of Putumayo's regional indigenous grassroots organizations, to improve self-governance. Indigenous self-governance has proven a successful development model in conflict-prone areas with high levels of illicit crops. Noting the indigenous' emphasis on conservation, Lopez called for greater inclusion in the region's development discussions. He conceded indigenous reserves attract illegal crop production, since they provide a "safe haven" from aerial eradication, but also noted the indigenous community's commitment to manual eradication and the destruction of coca "root by root."

¶10. (U) Afro-Colombian activist Jose Arly Quinonez outlined plans to strengthen community-wide political engagement and to produce sustainable economic opportunities, especially in rural areas. Quinonez thanked the Ambassador for USAID's USD 98,000 grant for institution-building, which will train 400 community leaders and 20 municipal officials. He noted that 4.5 percent of Putumayo's population (11,690 people) consist of Afro-Colombians. The Ambassador underscored the USG's commitment to working with Afro-Colombians throughout the country.

¶11. (SBU) Comment. Putumayo has received a great deal of U.S. Plan Colombia assistance since 2000. Between the heat,

humidity, rain, and mud it is still not Colombia's favorite tourist destination. But it is far better, safer, and more prosperous than eight years ago. We are seeing some return on our investment.

Brownfield